

THE STRANGER AT THE GATE

It has become something of a truism to suggest that Europe is now facing its greatest humanitarian crisis since the ending of the Second World War, when millions of displaced people on the continent of Europe had to be found food, shelter and hope. But we need of course to remember that although we may indeed see the current refugee emergency as a new and massive crisis facing Europe, it is not a new crisis for the world as a whole.

The United Nations Refugee Agency estimates that, worldwide, there are almost 60 million forcibly displaced people; over 45 million men, women and children are being helped or protected by the UN High Commission for Refugees, and over half of all refugees are under 18 years old. And, as we survey the European aspects of the refugee crisis, we need first to accept that nearly 90% of all known refugees are being cared for, not here in Europe, but in the developing world, those countries that can least afford any influx of impoverished newcomers. We can, I know, easily become so worn down by statistics that they no longer carry any useful meaning for us. It is attributed to Stalin of all people the comment that one death is a tragedy; the death of millions is a statistic. But we do need to understand at the outset of our discussion that Europe today is not being asked to carry heavier loads than the rest of the human race. Far from it.

As we think of the stranger at our gates today, there are various questions to answer. The first is where the refugees who seek asylum in the European Union have come from. At present, the continuing violence in Syria is providing the bulk of those who are seeking asylum here, and this figure is followed by refugees from the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq (although the total for these latter two is less than those who have crossed into Europe from Syria). More than one million migrants and refugees crossed into the EU in 2015. Nearly four thousand died trying, most of them drowning in the Mediterranean Sea.

Germany has received far and away the largest number of refugees but not as many - proportionate to total existing population - as either Hungary or Sweden. Adjacent to the EU and in part European (although not part of the EU) is of course Turkey, which also has a land border with Syria itself, and which accepted two and a half million refugees since the beginning of the Syrian civil war but which has now, essentially, closed its borders with Syria. Many of those who seek asylum in the EU in the past year have crossed from Turkey into Greece.

As we know, this whole development of an influx of refugees (primarily from violence and involuntary displacement) has caused major internal tensions within the EU. We are seeing the rise of right wing parties in many countries of the EU, and although the beginnings of the reemergence of a political extreme right predates the refugee crisis, there is no doubt that the current situation is fuelling discontent and an impatient demand for quick answers that will not be just or evenhanded, but which would be designed primarily to satisfy populist excitement. The most recent example of this "rise of the right" was in the recent election in Austria. The belief that jihadis have entered Europe presenting as refugees has gained

wide credence, undoubtedly giving momentum at this precise moment to the untested notion that the United Kingdom would somehow be safer outside the EU.

Any strategy for setting centrally agreed quotas of refugees for each EU country to receive has come to nothing. Probably sooner rather than later, the EU will begin erecting serious border controls between all its own countries. Meanwhile, although the UK will not engage with a quota system, a thousand refugees have been resettled within Britain, and the Prime Minister has said that the UK will accept up to 20,000 refugees over the next five years. The Republic of Ireland has agreed to accept 4000 refugees over the next two years. But there seems no end in sight to the violence of either the Syrian civil war or of the ISIL campaign at large. Possible solutions are made less than practical, in that (as is generally recognised) other wealthy and influential countries are conducting their own “proxy wars” through the mayhem and killing in Syria and Iraq. It is only when the major economic military powers agree a unified strategy that there will be any hope of peace within a reasonable timeframe. The challenge of giving safe shelter to more refugees will continue into the future.

At this point, it would, I believe be useful to look at the question as to why we should feel a moral obligation to do anything about refugees? Inevitably I will understand this primarily from a Judeo-Christian perspective, but it does have a wider context. In 2012, António Guterres (the former Portuguese Prime Minister who served as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees until the end of last year) brought together faith leaders and humanitarian organizations, together with government representatives and university academics for a conference on “Faith and Protection.” Guterres made this crucial observation, “...all major religious value systems embrace humanity, caring and respect, and the tradition of granting protection to those in danger. The principles of modern refugee law have their oldest roots in these ancient texts and traditions.” Emerging from this conference came a later set of principles - “affirmations” – for faith leaders in every context. These were not restricted to Christianity or Judaism, but explicitly drew foundations also from Islam (in the Koran), and from Hinduism and Buddhism.

The references from the Christian Scriptures are, as we might expect, from Matthew 25 and to those words of God to those who are accepted by him. *“Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; ³⁵for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, ³⁶I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.” ³⁷Then the righteous will answer him, “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? ³⁸And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? ³⁹And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?” ⁴⁰And the king will answer them, “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, * you did it to me.”* There is nothing ambiguous there. We cannot evade their direct bearing upon our conduct. The “affirmations” refer also to the passage from the Letter to the Hebrews (Chapter 13), which

again speaks of *welcoming the stranger* because by so doing one may entertain angels without knowing it - angels in this context being the messengers of God. The “affirmations” document also points out that there are no less than thirty six references in the Torah of the Hebrew Scriptures to honouring the stranger, drawing particular attention to Leviticus 19, with its demand that *“When a stranger resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the stranger. The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the stranger as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God.*

When we turn to the affirmations themselves, there are a number of these, but I draw attention to the opening statements that all are encouraged to take for themselves:

My faith teaches that compassion, mercy, love and hospitality are for everyone: the native born and the foreign born, the member of my community and the newcomer.

I will remember and remind members of my community that we are all considered “strangers” somewhere, that we should treat the stranger to our community as we would like to be treated, and challenge intolerance.

I will remember and remind others in my community that no one leaves his or her homeland without a reason: some flee because of persecution, violence or exploitation; others due to natural disaster; yet others out of love to provide better lives for their families.

I recognize that all persons are entitled to dignity and respect as human beings. All those in my country, including the stranger, are subject to its laws, and none should be subject to hostility or discrimination.

We should therefore never underestimate the underlying suspicions that many harbour (even if they will not always make these explicit) towards those from other countries and cultures who may become members of our communities here in Europe through the movement of refugees. Since deciding on the title for this talk, I came upon a poem, quite accidentally, by Rudyard Kipling. It was one that I had not chanced on before, but it is all about *the stranger within my gate*. It is very easy to be condescending and disparaging about the careless racism and jingoism that we encounter in the thinking and writings of a previous generation, but I invite you to consider whether at least some of Kipling’s sentiments may not be lurking beneath the surface today in our supposedly enlightened and compassionate society.

The Stranger within my gate,
He may be true or kind,
But he does not talk my talk--
I cannot feel his mind.
I see the face and the eyes and the mouth,
But not the soul behind.

The men of my own stock,
They may do ill or well,
But they tell the lies I am wanted to,
They are used to the lies I tell;
And we do not need interpreters
When we go to buy or sell.

The Stranger within my gates,
He may be evil or good,
But I cannot tell what powers control--
What reasons sway his mood;
Nor when the Gods of his far-off land
Shall repossess his blood.

The men of my own stock,
Bitter bad they may be,
But, at least, they hear the things I hear,
And see the things I see;
And whatever I think of them and their likes
They think of the likes of me.

This was my father's belief
And this is also mine:
Let the corn be all one sheaf--
And the grapes be all one vine,
Ere our children's teeth are set on edge
By bitter bread and wine.

Kipling's explicit xenophobia and overt hostility to "difference" may set our teeth on edge, but we would be naïve to assume that such attitudes are not present in our culture today. Indeed, sometimes we hear tones of unapologetic self-interest in everyday encounters. It cannot however ever be squared with the emphatic teaching of any of the major faith traditions. We should never accept that it might be so.

Turning to the response of Ireland, north and south, to the current refugee crisis, what has happened up to this point and what is planned for the future? It is a mixed picture. Northern Ireland is taking very few refugees, but there is an indication of good organisation for those who will be allowed into this jurisdiction. The Republic of Ireland has agreed to take a far larger number, proportionately, but there is little sign that an infrastructure is ready for this. In neither case are many refugees being admitted, a few thousand at most on an island with a total population of almost six and a half million. For what follows at this point I am indebted to two of my episcopal colleagues who have given me briefings for this paper, from a specifically Church of Ireland perspective. When it became clear that there was a migrant crisis of unprecedented proportions for this part of the world, the Church set up two working groups, one for Northern Ireland and one for the Republic, to work with other Christian traditions, other faith groups and also to liaise with government and with organisations that were organising aid in some way for those entering the country as refugees. The Northern Ireland group is headed by Bishop Ken Good, the Bishop of Derry and Raphoe, and the Republic of Ireland group by Bishop Patrick Rooke, of Tuam, Killala and Achonry.

From a Church of Ireland viewpoint on the Northern Irish response to the arrival of refugees from Syria (and in much of what follows I am either quoting or paraphrasing from Bishop Good's briefing paper), his assessment is that the two groups of Syrian refugees who have arrived in Northern Ireland thus far have undergone careful security screening, and a well organised reception and support process. Bishop Good

expresses the concern of many that the numbers involved are very small, and the pace at which those in desperate need are receiving help seems unduly slow. In company with other Christian traditions, the Church of Ireland groups are urging our Governments to accept more refugees and the Churches as a whole have offered to play a significant part in extending to any who come a warm welcome and practical support. Many of these responses will be in small but generous acts of service by befriending people, perhaps introducing them to a doctor or dentist, or in providing food, household supplies and toys to help them start a new life. The Northern Ireland Executive's own update on the first fifty refugees to arrive does suggest that they have received a real warmth of generosity and hospitality. The Northern Ireland group does, with others, wish to argue for the establishment of a Refugee Integration Strategy here in Northern Ireland in order to ensure, among other things, that children have immediate access to education, that there is a co-ordinated response to the sad reality of hate crime, and that refugees may have access to a planned pathway towards economic and social inclusion.

Bishop Rooke's briefing (and again I am either quoting directly or paraphrasing from the helpful document with which he provided me) outlines the situation in the Republic of Ireland, as his group understands it. This group has been liaising with the Government's *Task Force* which was set up to oversee the arrival, assessment, integration and resettlement of the 4,000 refugees the Irish Government agreed to take over a two-year period. The arrival of refugees has however been very slow, largely because arrangements were not in place. Only 176 refugees arrived in 2015, and very few have arrived in the first months of 2016. The group under Bishop Rooke's chairmanship has been advised that the passage of refugees in groups of forty from Europe is about to begin and arrangements are in place for them to spend approximately eight weeks in a special reception and assessment centre before being moved on to a re-orientation and integration centre. An issue to be taken very seriously is that not all those who will arrive will have been assessed for trauma, and many will arrive in serious psychological distress. (Those who have already been assessed over a six-month period by UNHCR will go directly to the re-orientation and integration centre.) The Church of Ireland group, along with Church and other faith representatives, have been informed by the *Task Force* that the most effective role they can play will be in terms of communication and in providing practical support - *communication*, by encouraging a spirit of welcome to the stranger and by allaying fears that those arriving have ulterior motives in mind, and practical support through offers of accommodation will be looked for, and of *services* such as local information, befriending, or English classes, all which will be essential.

We need also to be ready to protect, in every way we can and in every part of this island, those who are already within our gates but who are now being treated with suspicion, hostility and even violence. In recent days, the Immigrant Council of Ireland has revealed that reports of Islamophobia rose by 35 per cent in 2015 in the Republic of Ireland. Significantly, a black South African woman who has lived in Ireland since

1999 told an *Irish Times* reporter (in an article published within the past couple of days) that it is only in recent years that she has become afraid travelling on a bus and she now only sits at the front of the bus. Her car has been vandalised, not by out of control children or teenagers, but by adults on the estate in which she lived. We need not be in any doubt that racism is on a significant rise throughout Ireland.

Both bishops draw attention to the reality that there are already other asylum seekers and refugees who have been here for years (some still seeking rights of residency), and that they must not be forgotten amidst the more newsworthy events of refugees arriving from Syria. All should be met with all equal dignity, justice and humanitarian support that they deserve, and ideally within a programme that is integrated across the entire board, including those asylum seekers already in the country.

One of the issues on which we must be certain is that those who are now the strangers at our gates, or within our gates, have not left their homelands for motives other than desperation. There will be those who will play cynically on fears that those who come to our countries will swamp our public services or take employment from the resident population. The figures for those who will be granted asylum are tiny in proportion to the total populations of either Northern Ireland or the Republic of Ireland. Indeed, many of the different groups now working with the governments feel that the numbers of refugees being received are far too small, given the enormity of the problem that is facing the world at present. Others will play on different fears, namely that numbers of the refugees who arrive in Ireland will be jihadi. Again, from everything we know, huge care is being taken in the screening of all those who apply for asylum.

No, the greatest challenge is to our generosity, not simply a financial generosity (which may in fact not be of a particularly major nature), but a generosity of spirit, that for which we can neither legislate nor regulate, but which we can nurture and foster, in ourselves as in others.

But I leave the last word with Primo Levi, the Italian novelist and holocaust survivor who wrote so eloquently of his own harrowing experiences during the Second World War— “If we can relieve torment and do not, we become tormentors ourselves.”